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‘Is there Anything Else You’d Like to Say About Community Relations?’ Thematic Time Series Analysis of Open-ended Questions From an Annual Survey of 16-Year Olds

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Abstract

Since 2003, respondents to the annual Young Life and Times (YLT) survey have been offered an opportunity to give their thoughts on community relations in Northern Ireland. To date, approximately 4,000 comments have been received.

This paper reports on a systematic approach to a content analysis of this question. Our methodological aim is to demonstrate the analytic processes involved in creating a coding scheme and to show how a structured content analysis of these responses can complement the published quantitative survey findings, and, in turn, provide a more nuanced understanding of young people’s views on community relations in Northern Ireland over time. By doing so, we feel we also afford a sense of agency to respondents by integrating their opinions and emotions, which ranged from hope to despair, expressed outside the pre-determined survey content, as important data. Our approach shows that a meaningful combination of interpretive and deductive methods can demonstrate the added value that open-ended questions can have for a standardised survey instrument.

Keywords: open-ended questions; attitude surveys; thematic content analysis; young people; Northern Ireland

Analysing Open-ended Questions

Open-ended questions are a common feature of many attitude surveys, and the detailed responses they elicit can, potentially, provide more nuanced understandings of why respondents answer certain closed-ended questions as they do. These responses may also highlight issues that the researcher had not considered and can, therefore, help to inform data analysis and subsequent surveys (Garcia et al., 2004). Importantly, the inclusion of open-ended questions in quantitative research, which more often than not follows a positivist rationale, gives a degree of agency to respondents by allowing them space to voice their opinion, thereby, helping to equalise the balance of power between researcher and respondent (O'Cathain & Thomas, 2004). However, many researchers argue that open-ended questions should be used selectively, as they can act as a double-edged sword - providing data that enriches the research and findings, but, at the same time, being time-consuming and somewhat problematic to analyse, leading some researchers to ask if they are a 'bane or a bonus' (O'Cathain & Thomas, 2004). While it is rare that all respondents will complete an open-ended question, a large scale survey can still generate a significant amount of textual data that should be coded and analysed, but frequently is not. These data will often consist of comments that vary in length and depth, ranging from one word answers to several sentences, with some respondents being more succinct than others. The fact that not all respondents leave a comment is, in itself, a limitation, and this self-selected nature of responses can contribute to the data being largely ignored as questions arise such as: Are those who respond to this question different from the survey respondents as a whole? Do they hold more negative (or positive) views than others? In other words, how *'representative'* of the study population are their views? (Bryman, 2012).

Analysing these types of free-text data is labour intensive; requiring a mainly interpretive constructivist approach, which is very different from the objectivist, quantitative statistical data analysis commonly used for standardised survey data. This required time, effort and the necessary epistemological and ontological compromise in the way the data are treated may go a long way in explaining why open-

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ended comments collected in surveys are seldom analysed to the same extent as the closed-question data. It is more common to see one or two selected comments quoted as a means of typifying the quantitative analysis findings.

Despite the ubiquity of open-ended questions in social surveys, and while some issues such as those concerning ethics issues (Lloyd & Devine, 2015) have been discussed, there is surprisingly little methodological literature which specifically addresses when and why to include open-ended questions in surveys and how best to analyse these data. A sample review of survey method texts by Garcia et al. (2004) found no discussion of these issues. One of the main barriers is the lack of agreement on what 'types' of data are generated via open-ended survey questions. Some researchers hold clear-cut views about categorising their free-text survey data, describing these as '*quantitative closed-questions*' and '*qualitative open-ended questions*' (Arnon & Reichel, 2009, p. 191). As O'Cathain and Thomas (2004) note, other researchers are more ambiguous, describing open-ended comments as '*quasi-qualitative data*' (Murphy et al., 1998), while O'Cathain and Thomas (2004) define this type of data as being strictly neither qualitative nor quantitative. We argue that responses to open questions are qualitative data that not only complement but enrich survey findings, drawing attention to underlying complexities, nuances and sometimes contradictions that are difficult/impossible to capture in a closed question. All of this appears to confirm the existing discord between ontological and epistemological positionality of those tasked with the analysis of open-ended survey data. Inconsistency in how to categorise data generated from open-ended survey questions has, thus, left a void in the development of a comprehensive analytic strategy for dealing with these data.

One approach to the analysis of free-text survey data, often referred to as 'quantitized' statistical analyses, is to give the comments a numeric value which represents an identified theme or category within the text, thus facilitating integration of numeric and non-numeric data. Quantitizing is now a common approach within mixed method studies (Sandelowski, 2009) reflecting, in part, the emergence and development of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) packages such as Atlas ti, Max QDA, NVivo and others. CAQDAS packages have been used in the analysis of open survey questions in a variety of contexts (Fielding, Fielding, & Hughes, 2013). According to some (Coffey, Holbrook, & Atkinson, 1996), the emergence of CAQDAS has led to a new orthodoxy and homogenisation in text analysis, although others (e.g. Fielding & Lee, 1998) are less convinced. The effortless word count and word frequency functions that CAQDAS software offers facilitate the production of visually attractive quantitative representations of textual data, for example via the increasingly popular word clouds, which give the impression of data analysis, and which can in relation to *some* questions be meaningful. If, for example, respondents are presented with a list of short answer options to a question on the TV programmes they watch or the papers they read; a quantification

of all 'other' responses to these questions would be a sensible approach. Another example would be a question of the '*What three words first come to your mind when thinking about…*' type. Again, a quantification of single-word responses in this question type is a reasonable and appropriate strategy for survey researchers.

However, free text answers, which are the focus of this article, present more complex challenges. These comments provide more detailed reflection and context, and applying a standardised, computerised quantitative word count logarithm is likely to decontextualise the responses. This would suggest that the use of word frequency counting as a mechanism for quantification is inappropriate for open comments beyond a first stage of explorative data analysis, namely a simple scanning of text in order to identify key themes. Dempster, Woods and Wright (2013) labelled such an approach the '*mustard seed approach*'. Although this was not used in a survey context, it is easily transferrable to open-ended survey data of the nature discussed here.

In line with this, Rohrer et al. (2017) explain that data analysis strategies using CAQDAS can generally be described as falling into two categories: one that is more deductive in nature, relying on a predetermined set of words, phrases or grammatic style, and the other an inductive strategy that is more data driven. The potential benefits of computer assisted handling of large amounts of textual data are obvious, particularly in light of the challenges facing researchers coping with the escalating amount of published textual information from multiple sources including social media sites like Twitter and Facebook, blogs, web feeds and online discussion boards as well as more traditional forms of text. However, the richness of speech and the nuances of individual communication styles continue to make automated text analyses difficult. As Rohrer et al. (2017) point out, while the promise of automated analysis is there, the technology is currently not suitable for analysing human language.

Giving responses numeric values may not be appropriate for all studies and, as highlighted by Collingridge (2013), will only be as good as the manner in which the data were collected and analysed prior to being quantified. Essentially, quantification requires an initial step of explorative and interpretive analysis, which follows a qualitative rationale. Some promising solutions for mining textual data are emerging using a combination of automation and manual coding with encouraging results in terms of improved accuracy in categorisation (e.g. Schonlau & Couper, 2016). As Sandelowski (2009, p. 208) notes, this process of converting non-numeric data into numeric data is not without controversy because it is guided by subjective judgements and assumptions which are not always made transparent. Such a lack of auditability would be seen as a fundamental weakness in rigour in qualitative research practice.

Content analysis is an approach which is used to quantify mostly textual data according to a set of predetermined categories. It is more often used for examining

the content of newspapers, political speeches, television and mass media, including social media, but is flexible enough to be applied to different types of textual information (Bryman, 2012). Central to a content analysis is the development of a coding scheme whereby a set of rules guide which factors need to be taken into account to assign a code to a specific category. The rules should be applied consistently, thus limiting researcher bias as much as possible. Like quantitization, a content analysis is only as good as the source of the text, while codifying categories also entails personal judgement and assumptions. This is not to suggest that quantitative research is free of such personal judgement and assumptions, as these feed into all elements of the process from the questionnaire design to the data analysis. However, a coding scheme with clear transparent rules/guidelines is of particular importance when coding data that consists of both 'manifest' (where the meaning is unambiguous) and 'latent' (where the meaning is more abstract) content, where manifest and tangible content is easier to identify than latent content which requires a high degree of inference or interpretation on the part of the coder (Robson, 1993, p. 276).

Approaches to the analysis of free-text comments from open-ended questions may not be as developed as other analytic techniques in the social sciences. However, a number of core guiding principles are evident throughout the literature that are relevant for, and can be applied directly to, analysing these types of data. They may seem obvious, but are worth drawing attention to:

(1) There should be a good reason for quantifying non-numerical data (e.g. what contribution will it make to the study overall?);
(2) Clearly defined research questions should be specified;
(3) The analytic approach needs to be transparent at every stage;
(4) A set of rules should be set out and followed consistently (e.g. a comprehensive coding schedule;
(5) The approach should be able to be replicated by others;
(6) The limitations inherent in the data analysis must be acknowledged;
(7) The analysis is a complement to, and not a substitute for, properly designed qualitative research;
(8) The quality of the text analysis is predicated on the quality of the initial data source.

Overview of the YLT Survey

This paper draws on data from the Young Life and Times (YLT) survey. YLT, an annual cross-sectional survey, was set up in 2003 to record the views of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland on a range of key social issues. It is one of a suite of three

attitudes surveys, the others being Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) and the Kids' Life and Times (KLT) surveys which capture the views of adults (18+) and 10/11 year olds respectively. The surveys are all key constituents of Access Research Knowledge (ARK) (http://www.ark.ac.uk). ARK is Northern Ireland's Social Policy hub, and is based across Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University.

The YLT sample is taken from the Child Benefit Register provided by the UK government's Her Majesties Revenue and Customs (HMRC) who administer the benefit. Child Benefit is a benefit for people bringing up children and is paid for each child, and despite legislative changes, the sample of 16-year olds available to ARK for the YLT survey remains universal. YLT is primarily a paper survey which is posted to respondents. While respondents have the option of completing online or by phone, the vast majority (around 85%) opts for postal paper completion. Initially the sampling frame consisted of those sixteen year olds whose 16th birthday occurred in the February of the survey year (2000 approx.), in 2008 this increased to those with birthdays in February and March (3800 approx.), then due to increased funders and the need for a split survey from 2014 the survey now includes those with birthdays in January, February and March (5200 approx.). While the response rate has fluctuated over the years, on average it is around 30%. Full details of each year's content, sampling frame and response rates can be found at www.ark.ac.uk/ylt/datssets/techinfo.html. All survey results are available online and include analyses by sex and religion. The datasets are freely available with details and instructions for access given in Appendix 1.

As it emerges from decades of conflict, monitoring relations between the two main communities in Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant, remains important as the improvement of these relations is a core policy target. As such, a suite of questions on 'Community Relations' have featured in the YLT survey each year; while these questions have varied over the years, a set of around ten core questions are asked annually. The module of questions on community relations always ends with the question: 'Is there anything else that you would like to say about community relations in Northern Ireland?'

Approximately 30 per cent of young people each year complete this open-ended question, and, as a result, from 2003 to 2018, around 4,700 16-year olds have shared their views.

The analysis and discussion that follows, focuses on the responses to two of these core survey questions:

> What about relations between Protestants and Catholics? Would you say they are better than they were 5 years ago, worse, or about the same now as then?
>
> What about in 5 years' time? Do you think relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better than now, worse than now or about the same?

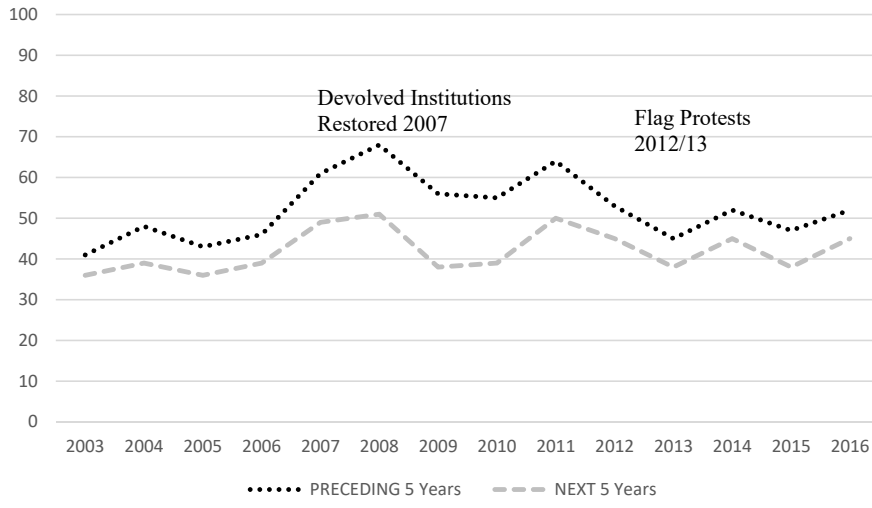

Figure 1 Respondents who feel that relations between Protestant and Catholics are better than the PRECEDING 5 years and Respondents who feel they will be better in NEXT 5 years 2003 – 2016 (%)

The time series nature of the questions and their inclusion in YLT show clearly that responses are affected, positively and negatively, by external events either increasing/decreasing a sense of optimism or pessimism, as shown in Figure 1.

Much use has been made of the YLT data to examine how attitudes to community relations have changed (or not) since 2003 (Schubotz, 2017; Schubotz & Devine, 2014); however, this has mainly drawn on the statistical data from the YLT surveys. While information from the open-ended question has been valuable in illuminating particular perspectives in specific years, it has not, until now, been systematically analysed.

Analytic Approach and Research Questions

The analytic approach used to explore these open-ended responses systematically was a thematic content analysis (Richie & Lewis, 2003). We focused on four selected years of data of the YLT survey: 2003 – the inaugural survey year; then in 5-year steps the 2008 and 2013; and finally 2016 – the most recent data to be analysed. Content analysis is an unobtrusive method of data analysis as information can be obtained from participants without the physical presence of a researcher (Bryman, 2012, p. 304). This is particularly pertinent when analysing attitudes to community relations in Northern Ireland where people may be wary of openly express-

ing their views for fear of creating an uncomfortable atmosphere. Indeed, given the contested history of Northern Ireland and a potential reluctance of people to express their views on community relations, it is likely that the open comments collected in the survey were more forthright than had they been collected face to face. The authors read all the comments from the open-ended community relations question from 2003 to 2016 and agreed that there were three main overarching themes emerging which reflected to a large extent the option responses to the time series questions (and an 'other' category). This allowed us to establish how the comments related to the time series questions covered in Figure 1. The themes took their name from common phrases repeatedly occurring in respondents' answers. Within each theme, there were a number of sub-themes that could be identified. Categorising the textual data by main theme, then sub-theme, made analysis more manageable, allowing subsets of data to be extracted for greater in-depth analysis, rather than attempting an in-depth analysis of all the comments.

Three overarching standpoints on community relations were evident:

(1) Young people who have positive views and believe community relations in Northern Ireland are '*good, getting there'*;

(2) Young people who are to a degree ambivalent or express a mixture of both positive and negative views and who believe that *'more needs to be done'*;

(3) Young people with very negative views who consider community relations in Northern Ireland to be *'not good, still divided'*.

Some comments were short with just a few words; others were longer, ranging from one or two sentences to a paragraph. Many of the comments contained both positive and negative comments, and some respondents were more articulate than others. Responses from 16-year olds who alluded to different topics that did not relate specifically to community relations were grouped into the *'other'* category**.** These four identified categories formed the foundation of the thematic analysis. Coding the comments in this way naturally gave rise to significant lines of further enquiry. For example, while there is a supplementary question at the end of the survey where respondents can suggest topics for inclusion in future surveys, respondents may look at community relations through a particular prism that could also be equally useful for inclusion in future years.

Therefore, the presented content analysis is underpinned by the following additional research questions:

- If young people think community relations are good, what are the main drivers of positive change?
- If respondents believe more needs to be done, what is it that is required; what is missing?

- If community relations are not good and society is still divided, what is holding back positive change?
- Are there other issues emerging that are not being captured in the survey?

Developing a Coding Scheme

Having identified these four overarching categories, the next step was to develop a coding scheme by which to assign each comment. The authors agreed on a set of guidelines which stipulated both the explicit and latent content to look for in respondents' comments. Respondents whose comments contained both positive and negative comments were categorised under the 'More needs to be done' theme as set out in Table 1 (positive/negative continuum). Respondents were assigned to one main theme only. They could be attributed to more than one subtheme, within their designated main theme. The role of these guidelines was to provide analytic transparency, to keep the coding as consistent as possible and to limit the effect of researcher bias. A new variable was created (CR Perspective) and respondents coded 1 to 4 accordingly. This variable was added to the dataset for each of the four years in question. This will allow for analyses across a variety of variables for future investigation.

As noted in the literature, some categorisations are more straightforward than others, particularly where the content is manifest. This was more often the case in the negative category (3), where comments were, generally, easier to code because they were more likely to be blunt and straight to the point. We found that less time was required to interpret these type of comments. For example, the following comment was quickly coded in the 'Not good, still divided' category (3).

> *'I believe that community relations are very broken/segregated around Northern Ireland especially Belfast!*' (Female, Catholic, 2013).

While not universal, quotes exhibiting positivity were often more explanatory so there was more to contemplate. For example, the beginning of the following quote suggested it should be categorised in the most positive category (1), but the ending few words of the sentence generated some hesitation.

> '*Community relations in Northern Ireland in my opinion has vastly improved and religion isn't much of an issue anymore, except for maybe a small minority'. (Male, Catholic, 2008)*

It was eventually coded in the positive category (1) but more time was spent deciding on the most appropriate designation, requiring a more interpretative approach to the content. While survey years were analysed individually to ensure that the coding scheme could be amended to capture emerging themes, the initial coding scheme proved appropriate. This is discussed in more detail below.

Table 1 Coding Scheme

Good, getting there	More needs to be done	Not good, still divided	Other
1	2	3	4
Hope for the future	At least some positivity.	Signs of permanency (e.g. phrases like *'will never change', 'always be there'*)	References to non-community relations issues
Looking forward	Wish list with some hope for the future.	Going backwards living in the past	No obvious specific community relations views
Positive self-conscious emotions (happy, hopeful, glad, proud etc.)	Advice/solutions for improvement	Negative self-conscious emotions (e.g. fear, worry, sadness, shame, hate, scared)	Don't care/Nothing to do with me
Improved/improving relations	Positive/negative continuum	References to negative past events/ experiences etc.	
Examples of positive personal social integration (attending cross-community events/activities etc.)		Reasons why it will not change (e.g. people are too bigoted, too ignorant, too narrow minded)	
		Angry statements	

Findings

Who Answered the Open-ended Question?

Table 2 details the total number of young people who responded to the survey in each of the selected years and the number who completed the open-ended question on community relations. This shows that there has been little change in the proportion of respondents who choose to leave a comment - ranging from 28 per cent to 31 per cent.

In seeking to identify any factors which might influence the likelihood of a respondent completing the open-ended question, a basic direct logistic regression was carried out looking at two background variables, namely, gender and religion. This showed a varied and inconsistent pattern of responses. For example, females

Table 2 Percentage of respondents who completed the open-ended question

Survey Year	Total sample size	Total number of respondents	Number of respondents who left a comment	% of respondents commenting
2003	1971	902	278	31
2008	4088	941	279	30
2013	3861	1367	378	28
2016	3513	1009	280	28

were significantly more likely to leave a comment in the earlier survey years (2003, 2008) than males; in 2003 females were 1.65 times more likely than males to comment. No significant gender differences were found for 2013 and 2016. Respondents' religion had no direct effect on whether or not young people commented in these early years. However, in 2013, Protestants were significantly less likely than Catholics to complete the open-ended question (with an odds ratio of .66). In the same year, those with no religious background were more likely than Catholics or Protestants to comment, but the finding was not significant. However, in 2016, those with no religious background were one and a half times more likely than Catholics to complete the open-ended question with an odds ratio of 1.50. (See table A, Appendix 2) This indicates that, for the four years in question, neither gender nor religious background extensively affected the likelihood of leaving a comment.

The results of the coding exercise were then compared with the two key YLT questions on community relations – perceptions of community relations compared to five years ago, and how they might be in five years' time. We found a high level of correspondence between closed questions and open comments especially among young people who expressed negative attitudes. For example, of those young people in 2003 who thought relations between Protestant and Catholics were 'worse' than they were five years earlier, 64 per cent were captured in the 'Not good, still divided' category. In 2016, of those who said relations were worse than five years ago, 85 per cent were captured under this category (see Table 3). Meanwhile, of the young people in 2013 who predicted relations to be worse in five years' time, 72 percent were captured under the 'Not good, still divided' category (Table 4). This supports the researchers' observations that negative comments tended to be more candid and characteristic of manifest content. Similar experiences with negative comments were reported in other studies (Borg & Zuell, 2012, Poncheri et al., 2008).

Table 3 What about relations between Protestants and Catholics? Would you say they are better than they were 5 years ago, worse, or about the same now as then?

	Category 3 - Not good, still divided			
Q response	2003	2008	2013	2016
Worse	64% (n=32)	71% (n=10)	67% (n=35)	85% (n=17)

Table 4 What about in 5 years' time? Do you think relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better than now, worse than now, or about the same as now?

	Category 3 - Not good, still divided			
Q response	2003	2008	2013	2016
Worse	72% (n=34)	50% (n=10)	72% (n=48)	75% (n=21)

What did Young People Say?

Within each theme a number of subthemes were identified, and a count of these helped indicate the significance of the issue to the respondents in that particular year (for a summary of the main themes and subthemes see Tables B and C, Appendix 2). Many of the sub-themes overlap, for instance, 'Generational influences' is a significant factor in all young people's comments but means different things in different contexts - in some cases, generational influences were expressed as a force for good, in other cases generational influences were expressed as a negative force.

Those who think community relations are 'good, getting there' are more likely to say that young people are more open-minded than older generations, while those who feel relations are 'not good, still divided' are inclined to blame older generations for passing on bigoted ideas:

> Is currently improving and young people are making up their own minds about things regardless of their parents or seniors views. (*Male, Catholic, 2013*)

> Older generations influence young people's views and continue to bring up the past instead of trying to move forward. (*Female, Protestant, 2016*)

Reactive Effect

In 2008, a higher proportion of respondents who completed the open-ended question thought community relations were good (28%) compared to 2003 (9%), 2013 (10%) and 2016 (15%). More participants expressed negative views in 2013 (46%), believing that community relations were not good and Northern Ireland was still very much divided. A similar pattern is evident in the quantitative data and this increased negativity could be seen to reflect contemporary political and policy developments (Schubotz and Devine, 2014). From a methodological perspective, this also suggests that the content analysis coding scheme is a useful tool in providing more textured analysis.

Using a chi square test, no significant differences were found between the views of Catholic and Protestant respondents in the open comments in relation to how they felt about community relations for any of the four years. However, in 2016 a higher proportion of respondents (42%) than in either 2008 or 2013 thought that 'more needs to be done' to improve community relations; with females being significantly more likely to express this opinion.

Theme 1: Good, Getting There

A greater interrogation of responses coded 1, 'Good, getting there', produced a variety of common subthemes which complemented the survey findings and, again, emphasises the efficacy of the coding scheme. The importance of *cross-community/ social interaction and integrated education*[1] as tools in breaking down religious barriers were common subthemes. '*Generational influences*' was another significant element, with most respondents expressing the view that attitudes would be *'diluted through the generations'* as younger people become adults, as the examples below show:

> I think the younger generation will sort it out. The current governing generation caused the problems. Things will be far better without them. (*Male, Catholic, 2008*)

The '*area effect*' was another important subtheme highlighted by the young people who felt community relations were getting better. There was a sense from the comments that the religious hostility and political unrest associated with poor community relations primarily affected urban and, often by inference, working class areas, as the following quote illustrates:

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1 The vast majority of schools in Northern Ireland are divided across religious lines. The term 'integrated education' in the Northern Irish context refers to a very small minority of schools (at the time of writing ca. 7%) which are set up to formally integrate pupils and staff from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds. At least 40% of staff and pupils have to be from either side.

> Mainly only hotly debated and provoked around Belfast areas, compared to reminder of Northern Ireland. Areas like the Ards Peninsula, religion isn't that important factor when talking or mixing with others. **(***Male, Protestant, 2013***)**

What sets 2008 apart from the other years is the number of participants' comments alluding to '*hope'* for the future; in contrast to 2003 and 2013, where hope was not so much in evidence, and 2016, where '*guarded optimism*' was a more appropriate classification. The following comments illustrate this point:

> It's good as Northern Ireland is becoming more modern and someday it could be just like London or New York but only safer. **(***Male, no religion, 2008***)**

> …I hope they don't go back to what it was like during the troubles. **(***Female, Protestant, 2016***)**

One of the more complex subthemes to emerge is the way '*increased ethnic diversity*' is perceived to account for improved community relations between Protestants and Catholics. Northern Ireland has experienced a significant increase in inward migration from 2001. On Census Day 2011, 1.8 per cent (32,400) of the resident population belonged to minority ethnic groups, more than double the proportion in 2001. Northern Ireland, however, remains the least ethnically diverse region in the United Kingdom. Two distinct opinions are discernible here – young people who think that increased diversity has *directly* encouraged good relations by encouraging people to be more inclusive and outward thinking overall, and those who believe increased diversity has *indirectly* improved relations between Protestants and Catholics by shifting attention from religion to ethnicity. Both views are captured within the positive comments section for 2008 and 2013. The issue did not feature as a positive contributing factor in 2003 or 2016.

> I think that the only reason that there isn't as much tension between Protestants and Catholics is because the tension is now between them and other ethnic groups. *(Female, Protestant, 2008*)

> It seems that all community troubles are caused by religion, therefore as a humanist I believe that the increasing ethnic diversity in Northern Ireland is beneficial to our local culture and helpful for us to more easily understand other people. **(***Male, no religion, 2013*)

Theme 2: More Needs to be Done

Many of the issues that participants identified as requiring more effort were associated with the same factors as those linked to promoting positive attitudes. For example, many participants were of the opinion that there should be greater

cross-community and social interaction, with more community events and greater opportunities to interact with others. Integrated education was another issue often discussed, and not just by young people attending an integrated school. All these issues are included in the following quote clearly articulated by a young male:

> Cross community projects are short term and are therefore extremely ineffective. When the current generation of youths become older then cross community relations will get better because my generation doesn't care or know very much about out past. The past is the past. Children at a primary school age should go to integrated schools, but that won't work for anyone older unless they already have this experience. (*Male, no religion given, 2013*)

What is interesting about this quote is the emphasis placed on integrated education from an early age and the observation that integrated education is less effective if undertaken at post-primary stage. The quote expresses a need for prioritising long-standing cross-community engagement as a way of improving relationships.

Generational influences are another significant issue in the body of comments. However, in contrast to believing young people are more open-minded than older generations, participants are more likely to point to narrow views held by young people, as a result of past experiences and the views of their parents. While some references were made to older people being '*stuck in the past*', comments also included advice on how this might be addressed so that young people can move on. Education was mentioned as one way of combating young people's negative attitudes, with an emphasis on learning about different people's background, as the following quote illustrates:

> Children are the future for relations between different communities, it is vital that we as the young people and leaders of the next generation are properly taught about not just their own backgrounds, but the backgrounds of many different cultures in Northern Ireland. (*Male, no religion, 2013)*

As in the previous section, statements by respondents also referred to the *'area'* people lived in. When this issue was discussed, it was often in terms of acknowledging that tensions remain, but distancing themselves from it – a type of 'othering' (Lister, 2004), as evident in the quotes below:

> It seems that in poorer areas where the educational system isn't as valued by young people there is more likely to be prejudice. (*Female, no religion, 2016*)

> Where I live, I grew up knowing very little of sectarianism and virtually nothing about politics. It was only in high school, in history, that I began to learn about politics. I feel that where a person grows up will influence their attitudes a lot, as at school I have noticed people who are living in rougher

> areas tend to be more defensive of their particular belief. **(***Female, Protestant, 2003)*

Theme 3. Not Good, Still Divided

Once again, the views of different generations, and people's residential settings, emerged as significant influencing factors within respondents' comments. However, views are underpinned by a pessimistic tone and a sense of permanency that suggests that some young people have become resigned to a bad situation. It was also more common in this section for respondents to recount personal experiences that often included self-conscious references to negative emotions that respondents held, such as sadness or worry. This is demonstrated in the following quote where the young person expresses how 'scared' she feels to go to her local shopping centre:

> We have a local shopping centre which is in between a Protestant community and a Catholic community and sometimes I feel scared to go to my local shopping centre. The two sides sometimes riot and things get worse for a few weeks and then die down. But will the fight ever stop? I think it is down to the parents on how they bring their children up but also the area which influences them. **(***Female, Protestant, 2008)*

When references are made to the views of older generations, it is usually from the point of view of parents passing on their bigoted views to their children (and sometimes grandchildren). In 2003, the transferring of negative views across generations was the most common issue discussed. Being 'stuck in the past' was also a common subtheme running across all four years. Unlike the previous section, few suggestions were offered on how, if at all, this situation could be addressed.

There were also subthemes which emerged in this section that were not evident in the other sections: most notably '*flags, emblems, marches*' and '*political disillusionment*'. Unsurprisingly, 'flags, emblems, marches' featured predominantly in the 2013 negative comments. Many of the 2013 YLT respondents commented specifically on the dispute that arose when the policy of the Belfast City Council in relation to the flying of the British flag on the Belfast City Hall changed. Some 16-year olds expressed how resentful they were that the British flag had been removed from the City Hall on most days of the year whilst others felt that this was an irrelevant issue. The issue of flags and other physical representations of identity was still being referred to in 2016, but with less frequency than 2013. In 2016, the tone of the comments about flags and emblems was also less divisive, with some respondents putting forward a compromise:

> Some housing estates are considered Catholic or Protestant. During times of celebration, like the 12th of July, Protestants may put up flags. I think this is fair. However, with flags up for longer than the date of celebration,

> often Catholics seek to tear them down. My point is that there is still rivalry between religions and no respect for either party, this is just one example. I have been made to feel uncomfortable by venturing to other parks for this rivalry even though I have not done anything wrong. Life shouldn't be like this. *(Female, Catholic, 2016)*

The political situation and politicians featured in all four years. As expected, 2013 contained many negative comments, mostly referring to lack of strong leadership and inability or unwillingness of politicians to cooperate with each other. However, YLT 2003 and 2016 contained a similar volume of comments relating to political disillusionment. Much of the comments echo the 2013 sentiments, displaying exasperation at partisan politics and political point scoring, as expressed by the following respondent:

> Until such times that politicians stop arguing about who is to blame and get on with what they were elected for, i.e. proper government within our country, we will never move forward. *(Male, Catholic, 2003)*

The UK decision to leave the EU following the referendum in June 2016 has been influential in shaping some of the 2016 negative comments about the state of community relations in Northern Ireland. This is an issue that would not normally be captured in the time series questions in the YLT survey, so the inclusion of the open question provided an opportunity to express attitudes here. For the following respondent, her concern is that leaving the EU may move the Northern Ireland constitutional question to the top of the political agenda, resulting in deteriorating community relations. For the second respondent, Brexit is an issue that has the capacity to hinder the efforts of younger generations to develop better community relations:

> I think that relations between Protestants and Catholics we will be worsened by the EU referendum as some might want a United Ireland so we can stay in the EU. *(Female, Protestant, 2016)*

> From watching the news etc. I think that there is a great divide between communities which in my opinion is inevitably grounded on sectarianism. I think it personally stems from the history of Northern Ireland, not just the troubles, but even back to the World Wars. I think this is because these 'sectarian' mind sets have been passed down through generations. I would like to think that my generation could deter this prejudicial hate but with issues like Brexit that will affect us I would think that the relations between communities will become worse. *(Female, Protestant, 2016)*

Responses in the 'Other' Category

The 'Other' category facilitates an examination of comments which are difficult to allocate into the three overarching attitudes on community relations. These comments may not specifically indicate a particular view on community relations, but are nonetheless important. Common subthemes include 'religious beliefs' – where respondents discuss personal religious sentiments; 'nothing to do with me' – where young people state that they do not care about, or they do not get involved in community relations disputes; and 'religion doesn't matter anymore' - where young people feel that religion is irrelevant now.

Additional subthemes can act as a useful barometer for charting young people's attitudes to issues that, while not directly linked to community relations in a traditional sense (i.e. religion), are linked to wider social issues. For example, in 2016 there were a number of comments relating to 'social inequalities' which included specific references to issues like homelessness, economic inequality, the recognition of same-sex marriage, all of which indicate young people's social awareness, endorsing the need to continue promoting young people's greater participation in debates about wider decisions that affect their lives.

Other issues that emerged within this section included positive and negative attitudes towards others within the community, the most common of which was views regarding increased ethnic diversity, particularly in 2013. While religion *per se* was not a feature of these comments, negative statements commonly indicated resentment at the perceived advantages of others. The following quote is an example:

> I don't agree with ethnic minorities getting benefits and free use of our health service. *(Catholic, Male, 2013)*

Relationships between older and younger people also featured, albeit infrequently:

> The older people have so much hate for us, but if we are respecting them then they need to show us some respect. *(Female, Protestant, 2016)*

One key advantage of this 'other' category is that it provides a facility to monitor the frequency of emergent topics beyond community relations, providing the YLT team with insights into the current topics relevant to 16-year olds. Importantly, it allows the researchers space to reflect critically on the assumptions and beliefs they bring to the research (Moore et al. 2016).

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this article is to demonstrate the practical processes involved in carrying out an analysis of open-ended survey questions and to highlight how the inte-

gration of the quantitative and qualitative analysis, while not straightforward, can provide more textured analysis. We also communicate lessons learned, namely: open questions when systematically analysed provide an important data source that both shed light on the responses to closed questions but also draw attention to the complexities and contradictions that cannot easily be captured in responses where one option must be selected; their analyses highlights that young people are not disengaged from the society in which they live as they clearly have important views that should be heard by those making decisions about their lives; they offer respondents a degree of agency; if they are to be used effectively, subsequent analyses and coding is demanding and should not be underestimated. Our experience has revealed some inherent limitations. As noted at the outset, not all respondents complete the open ended question which can be indicative of a self-selection bias. However, regression analysis showed that neither gender nor religious background significantly influences the likelihood of leaving a comment.

Our analysis showed that after categorisation, the vast majority of comments left matched the respondents' data from the closed questions, suggesting the trustworthiness of the quality of the open-ended answers in the YLT survey. Only rarely did respondents' comments contradict their closed responses. As expected, the authors found that manifest content tended to be bolder and straight to the point. Therefore, it was less time-consuming to code. But this could possibly introduce a risk that the views of respondents who express themselves in a subtler way are not paid the attention they need to be coded appropriately. In a minority of cases, comments were ambivalent or lacked detail, which made definitive coding difficult. The transparency of our coding scheme helped to address some of these difficulties to some extent and added to robustness of the data.

Our evidence clearly indicates that respondents' attitudes are influenced by external events and political developments, and again, this was to be expected. Our 2013 dataset is a key case in point, as it reflected the very vocal and controversial debates about flags, parades and symbolisms related to the Northern Ireland conflict, which took place in 2012/13 and coincided with the survey's fieldwork period. However, respondents' comments are also influenced by the questions included in the survey. For example, in our 2016 survey the subtheme of 'respect' emerged in the comments, suggesting that the closed survey questions on respect that were included for the first time in the YLT survey triggered these comments. There is little research on context effects of closed questions and their impact on open questions, which we believe should be a topic for future study.

With regard to the substantial context, the main research aim of this content analysis was to gain a deeper understanding of young people's attitudes towards community relations in Northern Ireland. Obviously, in a qualitative interview or a group discussion, participants can be prompted to explain in more detail what they think; and this option does not exist in surveys. However, despite these limitations,

and with the acknowledgement that open-ended questions cannot replace properly designed qualitative research, in the context of the YLT survey the research team consider these responses to the open question to be useful qualitative data that can complement the quantitative survey findings.

The analytic approach gave rise to further pertinent questions about what the drivers of positive change might be, what more needs to be done and what is inhibiting positive change. At the same time, comments not directly related to community relations gave useful insights into contemporary issues relevant to young people. These open-ended comments provide an additional source of information, drawn from a young person's perspective, which improve understanding of the quantitative time series data. In that respect, we argue that the content analysis of the open-ended question has enhanced the analysis of the YLT data by not only supporting the quantitative findings, but also drawing attention to the complexities that underpin them.

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Appendix 1

Details on the data used in this article and instructions for requesting access.

YLT is a freely available resource for anyone interested in attitudes of young people in Northern Ireland. They are available from https://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt/datasets/. There is no charge to use the statistics or data however, the YLT team is always interested in how the findings are used, and would be very grateful if you would let us know how you have used them. In particular, copies or links to reports or articles are very welcome. Contact details are:
Dirk Schubotz, email d.schubotz@qub.ac.uk
Martina McKnight, email martina.mcknight@qub.ac.uk

YLT datasets

The raw data for each year of the YLT survey are available as SPSS portable files. Some of the files have a .por extension, which is a SPSS portable file to make the file downloads smaller. The process to open a .por extension file is as follows:

1. Download the zip file and un-pack. Save the portable (.por) file.
2. Open SPSS.
3. In SPSS, go to open a file and click 'portable file' in the file type menu. Open the YLT portable file.
4. Save it as a data file (.sav).

Responses to open-ended questions

Not all responses to open questions are openly available due to confidentiality reasons. This includes the community relations responses. However, comments (with the additional variables) can be provided on request and upon signing of a data release agreement. Contact us at the details above.

Data used in this article

Survey year	Variable Name	Relevant question/description
2003/2008/2013/2016	RLRELAGO	Would you say relations between Protestants and Catholics are better than they were 5 years ago, worse or about the same?
2003/2008/2013/2016	RLRELFUT	In 5 years' time do you think relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better than now, worse than now or about the same?
2003/2008/2013/2016	Comments	Respondents who said 'Yes' to 'Is there anything else you'd like to say about community relations in Northern Ireland?' and left a comment.
2003/2008/ 2013/ 2016	CRPerspective	Additional variable created based on the content analysis of the community relations comments.
2003/2008/2013/2016	CRcomment	Additional variable created based on whether respondents left a comment or not.

Citation for YLT data: ARK: *2016 Young Life and Times Survey* [computer file]. Belfast: ARK. Available at https://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt/datasets/ (Accessed: dd/mm/yy)

Appendix 2

Table A Odds of a respondent completing the open-ended question

	Independent variable	Sig level	Odds ratio
2003	Male (ref) Female	.001	1.65
	Catholic (ref) Protestant	NS	
2008	Male (ref) Female	.007	1.5
	Catholic (ref) Protestant	NS	
2013	Male (ref) Female	NS	
	Catholic (ref) Protestant	.005	.66
2016	Male (ref) Female	NS	
	Catholic (ref) No religion	.016	1.49

NS = Not significant

Table B is a count of the number of people categorised into each overarching theme and Table C is a summary of the main sub-themes which emerged. The numbers in brackets in Table C are a count of the number of times particular sub-themes have been mentioned in respondents' comments. The number count gives an indication of how relevant the issue was in that particular year.

Table B Respondents categorised into overarching themes

Themes	2003	2008	2013	2016
Good, getting there	26	77	38	41
More needs to be done	101	84	137	118
Not good, still divided	132	75	172	97
Other	19	43	31	24
Total	278	279	378	280

Table C Summary of the main themes and subthemes

Main themes	Subthemes			
	2003	2008	2013	2016
Good, getting there	Area effect (10) Cross-community/social interaction (4) Integrated education (3) Generational influences (3)	Hope (32) Cross-community/social interaction (19) Generational influences (9) Religion doesn't matter (7) Integrated education (4) Increased ethnic diversity (3)	Generational influences (7) Area effect (6) Increased ethnic diversity (3)	Guarded optimism (8) Generational influences (5) Cross-community interaction (4) Respect (4) Integrated education (4)
More needs to be done	More cross-community/social interaction (26) Generational influences (14) More integrated education (10) Area effect (10) More tolerance/respect (8) Hope (6) Education (culture/history) (5) Flags/emblems/parades (5) Guarded optimism (4)	Positive/negative (15) More cross-community/social interaction (12) Forget the past (12) More equality/respect (8) More integrated education (7)	Generational influences (18) More integrated education (11) Flags/emblems/parades (9) Wise up/move on (7)	Positive/negative (21) More cross-community engagement/opportunities (17) Area effect (16) Generational influences (12) Stuck in/forget the past (11) More respect (8)

Main themes	Subthemes			
	2003	2008	2013	2016
Not good, still divided	Generational influences (21) Area effect (19) Political disillusionment (18) Stuck in the past (14) Education is key (9) Flags/emblems/ parades (8) Narrowmindedness/ bigotry (6) He got/she got attitude (5) Police (lack of faith) (5) Media (5)	Generational influences (16) Stuck in the past (11) Area effect (7) Politics/politicians (6) Negative self-conscious emotions (4)	Flags/emblems/ parades (53) Generational influences (19) Politics/politicians (15) Stuck in the past (8)	Politics/politicians (17) Stuck in the past (7) Negative self-conscious emotions (7) Flags/emblems/parades (5)
Other	Religious beliefs (7) Religion doesn't matter (2) Politics (2) Various single issues (5)	Religious beliefs (5) Doesn't affect me (4) Race (4) Politics (4)	Race (8) Increased ethnic diversity (negative) (7) Increased ethnic diversity (positive) (2)	Religious beliefs (6) Social inequalities (5) Nothing to do with me (4)